

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2104

434 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-5931

DISTRICT OFFICES:
29 CRAFTS STREET
SUITE 375
NEWTON, MA 02458
(617) 332-3333

8 NORTH MAIN STREET
SUITE 200
ATTLEBORO, MA 02703
(508) 431-1110

April 22, 2020

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

I write with urgent concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19 in Puerto Rico, Guam, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. As you work to distribute funds from previous coronavirus packages and begin work on additional recovery packages, it is imperative that territories receive not just quick and equitable distribution of funds, but investments that acknowledge decades of underfunding and governmental indifference.

While the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has no regard for government structure, the federal government's response efforts do. Established through Section 5001 of the CARES Act, the Coronavirus Relief Fund appropriates \$150 billion in direct assistance to state, local, tribal, and territory governments. While the Fund provides at least \$1.25 billion in support to each state, a mere \$3 billion is provided for all six U.S. territories, leaving five of the six territories with less than \$1 billion in federal support.¹ Coronavirus does not infect residents of American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, or the U.S. Virgin Islands any less viciously than it infects the residents of Massachusetts or New York or Wisconsin or Washington. I urge you to provide states and territories with the same base level of funding and any additional resources needed to contain the spread of COVID-19.

From Medicaid block grants to the Nutrition Assistance Program to the Coronavirus Relief Fund, decades of federal disinvestment have decimated the public health programs and infrastructure projects territories need to effectively combat COVID-19. On average, Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) across the country meet 44.94 percent of need. In Puerto Rico, only 1.91 percent of the need is met in the island's 39 Primary Care HPSAs.² A direct result of federal disinvestment, this disparity makes it exponentially more difficult for Puerto Rico to contain the spread of COVID-19. When the surge in COVID-19 patients has overwhelmed communities with robust public health infrastructure, it is difficult to imagine territories like Puerto Rico effectively containing the spread of the virus without significant federal assistance. At minimum, the territories deserve equal funding as states.

¹ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46298>


² file:///C:/Users/crankin/Downloads/BCD_HPSA_SCR50_Qtr_Smry.pdf

I also urge your Administration to ensure timely and efficient distribution of federal funds and technical assistance to the territories. This is especially important for Puerto Rico, which has been barraged by two hurricanes and ongoing earthquakes. With a 3.5 magnitude earthquake hitting Puerto Rico on April 11, 2020, the countless natural disasters the island has endured in recent years have depleted both local government and local nonprofit organization funds and ability to respond to COVID-19.³ While quick responses are essential to containing the pandemic in any setting, the residual effects of multiple natural disasters and federal disinvestment, make a rapid and aggressive federal response even more essential in Puerto Rico.

Detrimental to pandemic responses under normal circumstances, the damage caused by these disasters has been compounded by an inadequate and delayed federal response. For example, FEMA waited until January 2020 to approve \$39.5 million in funds to rebuild the only Community Health Center in Vieques, Puerto Rico, almost three years after the facility was destroyed by Hurricane Maria.⁴ Unacceptably delayed federal action has forced the residents of Vieques to go without access to proper medical care for nearly three years. Now, they are staring down a pandemic without access to care. If FEMA responded to the needs of Puerto Ricans as quickly as it responded to the needs of other natural disasters during this Administration, more residents of Vieques would survive this pandemic.

The strategies of the past have not worked. Consistently underfunding and delaying support to the territories has not yielded positive results; it has cost lives. Now is not the time for history to repeat itself, we must ensure the equitable distribution of funds to and rapidly deploy assistance to territories. For decades, the people of Puerto Rico and the other territories have been deemed second class citizens by our government. That must end today. Lives depend on your response.

Sincerely,



Joseph P. Kennedy, III
Member of Congress

³ <https://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eventpage/pr2020103001/executive>

⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/fema-approves-funds-rebuild-hospital-puerto-rico-after-teen-s-n1119741>